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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001135

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PARLIAMENTARY BY-ELECTIONS: HARBINGER OF
PRESIDENTIAL RACE

REF: BEIRUT 858

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Lebanon's upcoming parliamentary by-elections are a critical precursor to the upcoming battle over the presidency. Not only do they represent an opportunity to boost March 14's dwindling (whether due to political assassinations or other intimidation) numbers, but the Metn race may well make or break Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun's bid for the presidency. The political maneuvering for support in what we expect to be a tight contest continues both behind and in front of the scenes, and the intensity only goes to show that there is much more at stake than a mere by-election: August 5 is the first hurdle in the uphill march to the presidency. End summary.

¶2. (C) Lebanon's August 5 parliamentary by-elections are a critical preview of the upcoming presidential election. Two seats are at stake in two different districts: Beirut, to replace March 14 MP Walid Eido (a Sunni), killed in a June 13, 2007 car bomb attack (reftel), and Metn, to replace March 14 MP Pierre Gemayel (Maronite), killed in a November 21, 2007, targeted attack. The two assassinations whittled March 14's parliamentary majority from 70 to 68 out of a total of 128 seats, only three above the 65 needed to win a simple majority vote, which would be used in the second round of voting in the upcoming presidential elections.

TRAITORS IN THE MIDST?

¶3. (C) Compounding the problem of its dwindling ranks, several March 14 MPs have distanced themselves from or even deserted the Hariri camp in recent weeks. Mohamad Safadi (and three of his close allies), by calling for a mandatory two-thirds quorum to elect the president (some claim Syrian bribes were an incentive), appears to have distanced himself from March 14, along with Abdallah Hanna, who also is insisting on a two-thirds quorum. Worse yet, Mustapha Hussein, an Alawite MP from Akkar, in northern Lebanon, deserted March 14 in favor of an independent slot, though many now view him as pro-March 8. Bahije Tabbarah, normally a close Hariri ally, also bears watching; he recently stopped attending March 14 meetings and privately has been critical of Hariri, even going so far as to blame him for inciting

Sunni violence in the north.

¶4. (C) Numbers count here. The opposition is betting on March 14's inability to elect a president of its choosing for lack of a simple majority. While it does not have the votes to elect its candidate in the first round of voting, which requires a two-thirds majority, the constitutionally mandated second round only requires a simple majority, which, up until recently, March 14 was assured. The opposition's goal is to prevent this scenario at all costs. Unfortunately, it appears the abhorrent strategy of intimidating (and occasionally assassinating) March 14 MPs in an effort to undermine its parliamentary majority is perilously close to succeeding. Of course, even if March 8 does not succeed in luring enough MPs to its camp, it has the fall-back strategy of foiling the elections by withholding quorum (now widely accepted to be two-thirds of the house, more than what March 14 can muster on its own).

BEIRUT: NO SURPRISES

¶5. (C) We expect the Beirut election to reaffirm Saad Hariri's grip over the Sunni community. Hizballah, reluctant to exacerbate Shia-Sunni tensions and resigned to a March 14 victory (Sunnis represent 50,000 of the voters in the Beirut district, as opposed to only 16,000 Shia), is publicly refraining from putting forward a candidate or otherwise playing a significant role, leaving the field open for March 14's Sunni candidate, Mohamad Amine Itani, to win the seat. The Christians also are unlikely to play a significant role in this race, due to the predominantly Muslim nature of the district. The only potential risk to Itani's candidacy would

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be Hariri's failure to mobilize its March 14 supporters, who, assuming Itani's victory is in the bag, might not get out and vote. (We note, however, that this could change if Hizballah starts to mobilize its base: Itani's competitor Ibrahim al-Halabi is now putting up not-so-subtle posters around Beirut that say, "No to Israel, No to America, No to Itani, Yes to Halabi.")

METN: HIGH STAKES

¶6. (C) The stakes in the Metn election are much higher. Widely viewed as a public referendum on an Aoun presidency, this election pits former President Amine Gemayel (March 14's candidate) against a relative unknown Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) candidate, Dr. Camille Khoury. Despite the fact that Gemayel, a former head of state and father of slain March 14 MP Pierre Gemayel has the moral authority and sympathy vote, he faces a tough race. Polls suggest a close race, with the balance tipped in favor of the FPM.

AND LOTS OF DEALERS

¶7. (C) MP Michel Murr, often described as the godfather of Lebanese politics, holds the key to this critical election. After an initial short-lived agreement with March 14 leader Saad Hariri to throw his hat in Gemayel's ring, Murr changed course following an inopportune appearance by his (estranged) brother Gabriel, on Hariri's Future TV, during which Gabriel essentially trashed his brother and nephew, Defense Minister Elias Murr. As a result of Future TV's blunder, Michel switched sides to support Aoun's candidate, though we doubt we have seen the last of the godfather's Machiavellian maneuvering.

¶8. (C) Murr, whose supporters and allies in Metn consist of a hodgepodge of confessional groupings including Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Tashnaq Armenians, and others, has the potential to mobilize up to 30,000 swing votes (in a 163,000 vote district) that position him as kingmaker in an otherwise

close election. Should he abstain from throwing his weight behind either candidate, his followers probably will support Gemayel, ensuring a solid March 14 victory and throwing a huge wrench in Aoun's presidential ambitions. However, should he stick with Aoun, the tide will turn the other way, significantly enhancing Aoun's claims to the presidency.

¶9. (C) And, some speculate, Murr, living up to his mafioso image, may prove himself to be even more creative by splitting his vote, then taking credit for whichever side wins, thus enhancing his own status in Lebanon's complex confessional system.

¶10. (C) Meanwhile, the Patriarch, anxious to avoid a battle among the Christians, dispatched several of his Maronite bishops to meet with Aoun and Gemayel in an attempt to find a compromise candidate or other solution (i.e., Gemayel's other son, Sami).

OR JUST FOLD?

¶11. (C) One other possible outcome of the Metn elections is no outcome; FPM MP Ibrahim Kanaan and Kataeb party head Karim Pakraduni reportedly brokered a deal whereby the election would be postponed (perhaps indefinitely) pending a court ruling on the FPM's challenge to the legitimacy of the elections based on President Lahoud's failure to sign the decree. Depending on how this is done, this could be a win-win situation for both sides, allowing Aoun to maintain his credibility with the Christians while sparing Gemayel the disgrace of a potential defeat. It would also spare Murr from any potential embarrassment in the unlikely event his efforts to manipulate the election fail. (Note. The head of the State Council that would make the ruling, Judge Ghaleb Ghanem, is Murr's protege and Murr's wish would basically be his command. End note.)

¶12. (C) But there is a wrinkle: A court decision in the FPM's favor also would call into question the legitimacy of the Beirut election, not to mention all of the decree laws (including that which approved the Special Tribunal) passed

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by PM Siniora's government since last November's Shia walkout. That would be an enormous blow to the credibility of the Siniora cabinet in which Michel Murr's son Elias continues to serve. So, as of late Friday, most observers believe that, if Murr wants to use Ghanem's court to stop the Metn elections, Ghanem will simply rule that he has no competency in the case and refer it to the Constitutional Council instead. As the Constitutional Council is currently suspended (due to a separate Lebanese political crisis), such a decision would postpone the Metn election indefinitely, while permitting the Beirut election to proceed and avoiding any precedent about the cabinet's other decisions.

WHAT NEXT?

¶13. (C) President Lahoud refuses to sign the cabinet decree ordering the elections to be held. Though elections are constitutionally mandated within 60 days of a vacancy, PM Siniora delayed issuing the decree following Pierre's assassination due to the reigning political chaos following the November 11, 2006 resignation of six opposition ministers, which deprived the cabinet of Shia representation. Lahoud clings to his assertion that the cabinet is illegitimate following the Shia walkout.

14, (C) Nevertheless, the elections appear to be on track, though their outcome and the opposition's reaction and willingness to abide by their results remains to be seen. It is conceivable that Speaker Berri, who has refused to convene parliament until a legitimate government is formed, will use the alleged illegitimacy of the by-elections to keep

parliament's doors shut on September 25, despite his repeated assertions that he will hold the first round of presidential voting on time. More so if the opposition's presumed and constantly evolving schemes to get its hands on the presidency appears to be in jeopardy.

FELTMAN